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# On the flip side

THE LAST OF THE GIANTS
By C. L. Sulzberger.
*Weidenfeld and Nicolson. 1,067 pages. £6.*

FALLEN OAKS
By André Malraux.
*Hamish Hamilton. 123 pages. £2.*

Conversations with the great tend to produce better anecdotes a year later than weighty reporting the next day. When the great are seriously selling a line they are invariably dull and unpersuasive; when they are not selling a line they much prefer to talk about the past or people of the past, and so say things that are glad and sad by turns but are not history, and are not immediately printable if the journalist wants to be asked back again.

So Mr Sulzberger's anecdotes of everyone from de Gaulle and Churchill to forgotten diplomats and Africans is a highly readable and enjoyable flip side to his staid, responsible, ask-me-back columns in the New York Times. To M. Malraux no cliché uttered in his presence, far less one by himself, is devoid of philosophical importance. So he is a trifle high-falutin'; but since not many people got to hear de Gaulle's last table talk his recollections, too, are entertaining: a sort of flip mandarinese.

Mr Sulzberger's Churchill is almost in a half-world: Chartwell had a visibly declining owner whereas the Boisserie never quite seemed to, even at the end. Churchill in 1956 has three glasses of wine, two of port and two of brandy at lunch, reads his books aloud, plays with his carp and defends Stalin (who "never broke his word to me"). But although his lucidity no longer has a dynamo to keep it going, he seems more at peace with destiny than Malraux's report of de Gaulle, living with his cat, two television sets, his trees and the stars. The general is profoundly pessimistic, surviving "consciously at the end of a civilisation," watching "the funeral procession of a world." Nixon is popular "because Asia still believes peace to be possible." But that is a Pandora's box:

> I don't believe the United States, in spite of its power, has a long-term policy. Its desire, and it will satisfy it one day, is to desert Europe. You will see.

That is the authentic voice of gaullism all right, and it explains the despair of the Americans Mr Sulzberger writes about who had to deal with de Gaulle in his prime. M. Malraux can be as superficial as the next man: spotting a plough, he is instantly reminded of the Cincinnatus indoors. But then he hits the essence of gaullism in the next sentence:

> Perhaps the clue to his character was not simply the impulse to say "No," but that he was at ease only when he said "No."

So there is great contempt for the Pompidous of the world who believe things can be solved by getting people to lunch together. That, of course, would never do for journalists, Mr Sulzberger among them. Not much misses his eye or ear: Tito pouring claret into his champagne (learned from King Paul of Greece), Prince Bernhard drinking only bourbon because the Germans had robbed him of his scotch, an ill Dulles saying "the hell with it" in Paris and taking two portions of lobster bisque.

There are, naturally, many unguarded remarks. George Brown declares Gaitskell "is always away when troubles comes." Macmillan admits on the common market in 1962 that he has no alternative policy: "I have always made it a rule in my life to avoid fall-back positions. When you have a fall-back position, you always fall back." Allen Dulles of the CIA boasts: "The Russians are too smart to put bases on Cuba." Dean Acheson muses on Dulles and Selwyn Lloyd: "They're a pair of slick lawyers trying to outsmart each other." And Randolph Churchill and Julian Amery will not mention Eden in July, 1956, except as "the jerk."